

Testimony of Laura Amenta,
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Prepared for the Government Administration and Elections Committee

In Opposition of

Bill No. 839 An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidations of various state agencies.

Monday March 16, 2009

I am testifying to you in opposition of Bill No. 839 and in support of The Connecticut's Children's Trust Fund. I am saddened and concerned about the possible elimination of this worthy prevention agency and the possible transfer of some programs to the Department of Children and Families.

Each year approximately 30,000 cases of child maltreatment are reported in Connecticut and 10,000 children are born into families with at least one significant risk factor for abuse and/or neglect. In 1997, recognizing the extent of child abuse, the Connecticut General Assembly established the Children's Trust Fund as an independent state agency with the sole purpose of preventing child abuse and neglect.

In just eleven years, Connecticut has become a recognized leader in the area of child abuse prevention. Its *Nurturing Families Network* program has been given proven program status by the Office of Juvenile Justice and its *Help Me Grow* program is a model program that is now being replicated nationally by the Commonwealth Fund. The advice, innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of the Trust Fund has been a consistent force in understanding how to best prevent child abuse and neglect. Connecticut's Children's Trust Fund has been invited to testify before Congress as an acknowledged strength in understanding how to best prevent child abuse and neglect.

To house the prevention programs of the Children's Trust Fund within the Department of Children and Families (DCF) would be devastating. DCF is charged with Child Protection, Juvenile Justice and Behavioral Health and struggling with these missions. DCF is already under scrutiny regarding their ability to function as was seen during the recent public hearings. To add prevention programs into their mix would be a huge mistake.

Of significance, programs of the Children's Trust Fund are completely voluntary but are successful at engaging a high risk population. Families are at best distrustful of DCF and are not likely to voluntarily attend programs through an agency that has the power to remove their children. In addition, I strongly believe that innovation and success of prevention programs will become limited under DCF's oversight.

The effects of abuse and neglect can be devastating to a child. Maltreatment can cause impairment in brain development, psychological problems, serious injury and also can contribute to high school drop out rates, involvement in crime as well as poverty. Sadly, the children who experience abuse and neglect will often end up as adults on the caseloads of the Department of Mental Health and Addictions, Substance Abuse Treatment Centers, The Department of Corrections and/or Social Services and thus, the cycle continues.

Let me say plainly and simply that a \$1.5 million cut in Trust Fund program services today will result in millions of dollars spent on treating the consequence of family instability tomorrow. In addition, studies have shown that for every \$1 spent on prevention, the state can actually save \$6 in remediation costs.

There are other ways to achieve savings needed to balance the budget and preserve successful child abuse programs. The Children's Trust Fund has proposed bringing together the numerous prevention programs now scattered among a number of state agencies into the Children's Trust Fund. The Trust Fund is well positioned to enhance the work of individual prevention programs and ensure that programs from various agencies work together within the community to maximize services available to families – creating a cohesive system of community-based prevention services for children and families.

The independent council that oversees the Children's Trust Fund is supportive of creating a consolidated prevention agency that can share valuable resources and knowledge among a range of similar programs. We believe this approach is the right way to go, will strengthen CT's efforts for children and families - and be more cost effective.

In these increasingly difficult budget times, it is critical that we invest wisely in prevention programs that not only save lives, but ultimately save public dollars as well.

Thank you.